

May/June 1980

Statement on CIA use of journalists

The National News Council is deeply disturbed by the official disclosure that the Central Intelligence Agency has repudiated its commitment to prohibit use of journalists affiliated with American news organizations in any of its espionage or intelligence activities.

Assurance that no news personnel employed by American press agencies, newspapers, broadcasters, or other media groups would be hired by the CIA for any purpose was first given to a delegation from this Council by George Bush, then director of Central Intelligence, at a meeting in CIA headquarters on June 24, 1976.

A policy directive issued on November 30, 1977, by the current CIA director, Admiral Stansfield Turner, made this assurance formal by declaring that the CIA would not enter into any relationship with journalists "for the purpose of conducting any intelligence activities." The same directive forbade the agency from using "the name or facilities of any U.S. news media organization to provide cover" for its agents or actions.

Now, in testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Admiral Turner has disclosed the authorization since 1977 of what he terms a "very limited" number of waivers breaching the general ban that supposedly rules out employment of journalists among others. Admiral Turner has declined to specify publicly how many, if any, of these waivers have directly affected the press and the CIA has asserted in a subsequent "clarification" of his testimony that none of the waivers were actually used. But the Carter administration has joined the CIA in resisting inclusion in a new congressional charter for the intelligence agency of a statutory ban embodying the prohibition now theoretically in effect by administrative order.

The National News Council has always recognized this country's need for an effective Central Intelligence Agency. But that need must not be met through practices that make inescapable a destruction of public confidence in the integrity of the press as an independent instrument of public information free from governmental manipulation. A revival of the possibility that the CIA is using journalists as gatherers of intelligence or purveyors of propaganda would not only expose all reporters in many parts of the world to personal peril but also would undermine the credibility of news in ways subversive of democracy. The CIA was right to recognize that danger in its policy directive, but it has shown itself a slack guardian in a field where no slightest deviation from strict separation of journalism and intelligence functions is thinkable. The Council urges Congress to write an unequivocal prohibition into the law establishing a projected charter for the CIA.

Concurring: Ghiglione, Huston, Lawson, McKay, Otwell, and Puitzer.

Dissenting: Brady, Isaacs, Miller, and Rusher.

Abstaining: Cooney and Roberts.

Dissenting opinion by Mr. Miller (Mr. Isaacs concurring): I do not want to encourage the CIA to recruit reporters or encourage reporters to be recruited by the CIA. But I am opposed to extending any invitation to any legislative body to enact any legislation affecting the press.

Dissenting opinion by Mr. Rusher (Mr. Brady concurring): I dissent. My reasons are the same as those given June 31, 1978, when the Council last discussed the CIA. I quote:

The past deeds and/or misdeeds of the CIA are irrelevant here. If it has transgressed, it ought of course to be corrected. The principle question before us is whether the dissemination of false information is an impermissible activity *per se* for an agency of the United States government. The argument that it is rests on the contention that America is obliged by its own principles to forswear such activities, regardless of any possible deleterious consequences of doing so. The argument to the contrary rests upon the proposition, to which I adhere, that until and unless this country can persuade the rest of the world to subscribe to its principles, it cannot possibly afford to commit itself to their blind observance abroad in all cases whatsoever. In many desperate situations around the world, freedom, and even life itself, daily depend upon opposing foreign tyrants by means not permissible here at home.